

I am providing this testimonial on behalf of my husband, Jim Gaunce, who died of liposarcoma in April 1982. This account includes background information and steps I have taken seeking compensation. I want to add that, because of the classified nature of his job, Jim never told me what he did in Nevada until he was on his deathbed.

Jim Gaunce was an eagle scout, a NM VietNam Era vet and a mechanical engineer. Jim started working at ACF Industries parttime in 1962 while he was still in college. He worked at ACF full time from 1963 until Oct 1966 when he left to work for Gulton, Ind. ACF closed down in December 1966.

ACF was a contractor for Los Alamos National Laboratories on the Rover Project. Jim worked as an engineer on this project in Albuquerque and at Jackass Flats, Nevada, traveling to Nevada for the Rover test shots. His job there was to perform a post mortem on the nuclear rocket, operating the manipulators that dismantled the unit after the test shot. The unit was in a room by itself (behind a door of 6 feet of concrete, glass and steel). When the manipulators malfunctioned, Jim's job — as the youngest and least senior of the engineers — was to go into the "hot" room to fix the manipulators. He was allowed to be in there for one minute — after a minute he had "burned up". That means he received a year's worth of radiation in one minute and was not allowed to go back to the Jackass Flats test site for a year. Over time, the single minutes added up. And a part of his job that took a few minutes of his time when he was in his twenties, caused his death nearly 20 years later.

Jim was diagnosed with liposarcoma (cancer of the fatty tissue) in November 1976 a few weeks after his 36th birthday. He had a 15% chance of living 5 years. He beat the odds — he lived 5-1/2 years, dying April 28, 1982 at age 41. I became a widow at 38, our daughter, age 10, was in 4th grade, and our son, age 6, was in 1st grade.

In the 5-1/2 years after his cancer diagnosis in 1976 Jim had 6 major surgeries, 3 lung surgeries (one using experimental stem cell therapy at the medical school in Tucson), 3 surgeries on his left leg (one with radio-isotope implants at the University of New Mexico medical school), years of chemotherapy, and months of radiation.

He was the bravest person I have known. He never smoked, rarely drank and was an athlete in excellent physical condition. He went from never taking an aspirin to being on morphine and methadone every two hours. He used a plastic mouth guard to bite down on for the pain. After he was diagnosed with cancer, he coached his daughter's soccer team; when he became too sick to coach, he sat with his portable oxygen tank and watched both his kids' games (kindergardener and 3rd grader).

After he had become paralyzed and bedridden, I remember that he handed me a kleenex to hold because he was too tired to hold it himself any longer. He died at home in the spring. Our 6 year old was out playing in the sandbox, and our 10 year old was reading in her room.



Our family, one month after Jim's cancer diagnosis and first surgery. December 1976.



Jim (here with our three year old son) rode his bicycle from San Francisco to Los Angeles three months after his second lung surgery. June 1978.



Still playing softball; kids are eight and four. Summer 1980.

In 1984, I filed a wrongful death claim with DOE. My claim was denied in a letter dated February 27, 1986, from Henry A. Gills, Jr., Assistant General Counsel for General Litigation, in Washington, D.C. In part the letter stated: *"The exposure records clearly indicate that Mr. Gaunce sustained no exposure of any significance during the course of his employment with ACF Ind. Further, the type of cancer from which Mr. Gaunce suffered, as indicated in the medical records, has not been reported to be associated with the occupational exposure to radiation. In addition, we believe that there are serious questions as to the timeliness of the claim."*

I did not appeal the decision. I did not have the financial resources, the time to devote, nor the ability to sustain the anger necessary to pursue it. Although I knew an injustice had been done and I did not forget what had happened, I still had two children to raise and support, and they were my priority.

Even after this much time, it still remains true that:

1. *The radiation records had probably been altered in 1966 when ACF closed down., and some were missing. Engineers still there when ACF closed received copies of their radiation records — some told me that the numbers were substantially lower than they had expected. Jim was not sent a copy of his radiation records then (probably since he changed jobs 3 months earlier). Jim was at Jackass Flats test range in 1963 and 1964. (I remember — I was the young bride who packed the suitcase and waved goodbye.) Where are those records?*
2. *liposarcoma is relatively rare, only 2% of all cancers, and a cancer usually attributed to older people. According to the NM Cancer Registry between 1969 and 1982 more than 60% of the lipo sarcoma patients were over 50.*
3. *Jim could not qualify for workman's comp because he did not file an incident report within a year of the radiation exposure. He was exposed to radiation between 1962 and 1966, but the effects of the radiation did not show up until his cancer diagnosis in 1976 — 10 to 14 years later. This exposure time versus cancer incidence is consistent with the findings for Nagasaki/Hiroshima victims.*

Several years ago, I saw posters about DOE investigating work-related health issues. I called the 1-800 number but never received a reply back. On Saturday, March 18th of this year, I attended the meeting in Española led by Dr. Douglas of DOE. I talked briefly to Congressman Udall and to Kate Kimpan of the Washington DOE office. Since I did not talk publicly at the meeting, I am sending this letter as my testimonial on my husband's behalf.

I would like recognition for my husband for what happened to him (our country lost a fine mind), acknowledgment that the radiation records were missing or inaccurate, and compensation for our pain and for all that we lost as a family. I would like to have closure and a measure of old wrongs made right.

Jan Gaunce



Our last family outing, the New Mexico State Fair. September 1981.



The last photo of Jim; he is receiving an award from Gulton, Ind., (they named their baseball field after him). He is hunched over because of the pain he was in. This was taken 2 months before he became paralyzed and 4 months before he died. December 1981.

Jan Gaunce, (Judith A.)
March 30, 2000